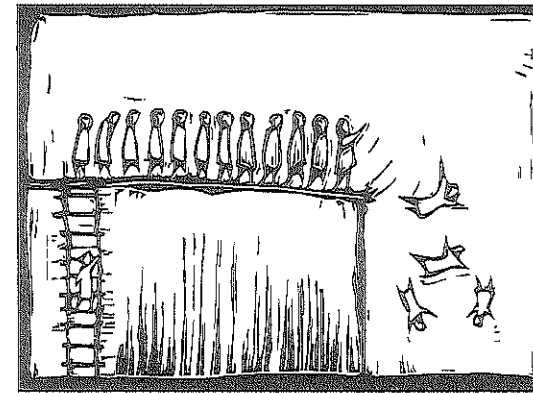


his death most scholars accepted his views of the world as unquestionably true. If they could prove that Aristotle had said something, that was enough for them. This is what is sometimes called 'truth by authority' – believing something *must* be true because an important 'authority' figure has said it is.

What do you think would happen if you dropped a piece of wood and a piece of heavy metal that was the same size from a high place? Which would hit the ground first? Aristotle thought that the heavier one, the one made of metal, would fall faster. In fact, this isn't what happens. They fall at the same speed. But because Aristotle declared it to be true, throughout the medieval period just about everyone believed that it must be true. No more proof was needed. In the sixteenth century Galileo Galilei supposedly dropped a wooden ball and a cannonball from the leaning tower of Pisa to test this out. Both reached the ground at the same time. So Aristotle was wrong. But it would have been quite easy to show this much earlier.

Relying on someone else's authority was completely against the spirit of Aristotle's research. It's against the spirit of philosophy too. Authority doesn't prove anything by itself. Aristotle's own methods were investigation, research and clear reasoning. Philosophy thrives on debate, on the possibility of being wrong, on challenging views, and exploring alternatives. Fortunately, in most ages there have been philosophers ready to think critically about what other people tell them must be so. One philosopher who tried to think critically about absolutely everything was the sceptic Pyrrho.

CHAPTER 3



We Know Nothing

PYRRHO

No one knows anything – and even that's not certain. You shouldn't rely on what you believe to be true. You might be mistaken. Everything can be questioned, everything doubted. The best option, then, is to keep an open mind. Don't commit, and you won't be disappointed. That was the main teaching of Scepticism, a philosophy that was popular for several hundred years in Ancient Greece and later in Rome. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, the most extreme sceptics avoided holding firm opinions on anything whatsoever. The Ancient Greek Pyrrho (c. 365–c. 270 BC) was the most famous and probably the most extreme sceptic of all time. His life was decidedly odd.

You may believe that you know all kinds of things. You know that you are reading this now, for example. But sceptics would challenge this. Think about why you believe that you are actually reading this and not just imagining that you are. Can you be sure that you are right? You appear to be reading – that's the way

it seems to you. But perhaps you are hallucinating or dreaming (this is an idea that René Descartes would develop some eighteen hundred years later: see Chapter 11). Socrates' insistence that all that he knew was how little he knew was a sceptical position too. But Pyrrho took it much much further. He probably took it a little too far.

If reports of his life are to be believed (and perhaps we should be sceptical about *them* too), Pyrrho made a career from not taking anything for granted. Like Socrates, he never wrote anything down. So what we know about him comes from what other people recorded, mostly several centuries after his death. One of those, Diogenes Laertius, tells us that Pyrrho became a celebrity and was made a high priest of Elis where he lived and that in his honour philosophers didn't have to pay any taxes. We have no way of checking the truth of this, though it does sound like a good idea.

As far as we can tell, though, Pyrrho lived out his scepticism in some quite extraordinary ways. His time on earth would have been very short if he hadn't had friends to protect him. Any extreme sceptic needs the support of less sceptical people, or very good luck, to survive for long.

Here's how he approached life. We can't completely trust the senses. Sometimes they mislead us. It's easy to make a mistake about what you can see in the dark, for example. What looks like a fox may only be a cat. Or you might think you heard someone calling you when it was only the wind in the trees. Because our senses quite often mislead us, Pyrrho decided *never* to trust them. He didn't rule out the possibility that they might be giving him accurate information, but he kept an open mind on the issue.

So, whereas most people would take the sight of a cliff edge with a sheer drop as strong evidence that it would be very

foolish to keep walking forward, Pyrrho didn't. His senses might be deceiving him, so he didn't trust them. Even the feeling of his toes curling over the cliff edge, or the sensation of tipping forward, wouldn't have convinced him he was about to fall to the rocks below. It wasn't even obvious to him that falling on to rocks would be so bad for his health. How could he be absolutely sure of that? His friends, who presumably weren't all Sceptics themselves, stopped him having accidents, but if they hadn't, he would have been in trouble every few minutes.

Why be afraid of savage dogs if you can't be sure they want to hurt you? Just because they're barking and baring their teeth and running towards you doesn't mean they'll definitely bite. And even if they do, it won't *necessarily* hurt. Why care about oncoming traffic when you cross the road? Those carts might not hit you. Who really knows? And what difference does it make if you are alive or dead anyway? Somehow Pyrrho managed to live out this philosophy of total indifference and conquer all the usual and natural human emotions and patterns of behaviour.

That's the legend anyway. Some of these stories about him were probably invented to make fun of his philosophy. But it's unlikely that they're all fictional. For example, he famously kept completely calm while sailing through one of the worst storms anyone had ever witnessed. The wind was tearing the sails to pieces and huge waves were breaking over the ship. Everyone around him was terrified. But it didn't bother Pyrrho in the least. Since appearances are so often deceptive, he couldn't be absolutely sure that any harm would come from it. He managed to remain peaceful while even the most experienced sailors were panicking. He demonstrated that it's possible to stay indifferent even under these conditions. That story has a ring of truth about it.

As a young man, Pyrrho visited India. Perhaps that was what inspired him in his unusual lifestyle. India has a great tradition of spiritual teachers or gurus putting themselves through extreme and almost unbelievable physical deprivation: being buried alive, hanging weights from sensitive parts of their bodies, or living for weeks without food, to achieve inner stillness. Pyrrho's approach to philosophy was certainly close to that of a mystic. Whatever techniques he used to achieve this, he certainly practised what he preached. His calm state of mind made a deep impression on those around him. The reason he didn't get worked up about anything was that, in his opinion, absolutely everything was simply a matter of opinion. If there's no chance of discovering the truth, then there's no need to fret. We can then distance ourselves from all firm beliefs, because firm beliefs always involve delusion.

If you'd met Pyrrho, you'd probably have thought he was mad. And perhaps he was in a way. But his views and his behaviour were consistent. He would think that your various certainties were simply unreasonable and stood in the way of your peace of mind. You are taking too much for granted. It's as if you have built a house on sand. The foundations of your thought aren't anything like as firm as you'd like to believe and are unlikely to make you happy.

Pyrrho neatly summarized his philosophy in the form of three questions anyone who wants to be happy should ask:

What are things really like?

What attitude should we adopt to them?

What will happen to someone who does adopt that attitude?

His answers were simple and to the point. First, we can't ever know what the world is really like – that's beyond us. No one will

ever know about the ultimate nature of reality. Such knowledge simply isn't possible for human beings. So forget about that. This view is completely at odds with Plato's Theory of Forms and the possibility that philosophers could gain knowledge of them through abstract thought (see Chapter 1). Secondly, and as a result of this, we shouldn't commit to any view. Because we can't know anything for sure, we should suspend all judgement and live our lives in an uncommitted way. Every desire that you have suggests that you believe that one thing is better than another. Unhappiness arises from not getting what you want. But you can't know that anything is better than anything else. So, he thought, to be happy you should free yourself from desires and not care about how things turn out. That is the right way to live. Recognize that nothing matters. That way nothing will affect your state of mind, which will be one of inner tranquillity. Thirdly, if you follow this teaching this is what will happen to you. You will start off by being speechless, presumably because you won't know what to say about anything. Eventually, you will be free from all worry. That's the best you or anyone can hope for in life. It's almost like a religious experience.

That's the theory. It seemed to work for Pyrrho, though it is hard to see it giving the same results for most of humanity. Few of us will ever achieve the kind of indifference that he recommended. And not everyone will be lucky enough to have a team of friends to save them from their worst mistakes. In fact, if everyone followed his advice, there wouldn't be anyone left to protect the Pyrrhonic Sceptics from themselves and the whole school of philosophy would very quickly die out as they toppled over cliff edges, stepped in front of moving vehicles, or were savaged by vicious dogs.

The basic weakness of Pyrrho's approach is that he moved from 'You can't know anything' to the conclusion 'Therefore

you should ignore your instincts and feelings about what is dangerous'. But our instincts do save us from many possible dangers. They may not be totally reliable, but that doesn't mean we should just ignore them. Even Pyrrho is supposed to have moved away when a dog snapped at him: he couldn't completely overcome his automatic reactions however much he wanted to. So to try and live out Pyrrhonic Scepticism seems perverse. Nor is it obvious that living this way produces the peace of mind that Pyrrho thought it would. It is possible to be sceptical about Pyrrho's Scepticism. You might want to question whether tranquillity really will come from taking the sorts of risks that he took. It might have worked for Pyrrho, but what is the evidence that it will work for you? You might not be 100 per cent sure that a ferocious dog will bite you, but it makes sense not to take the chance if it is 99 per cent certain.

Not all sceptics in the history of philosophy have been as extreme as Pyrrho. There is a great tradition of moderate scepticism, of questioning assumptions and looking closely at the evidence for what we believe, without attempting to live as if everything was in doubt all of the time. Sceptical questioning of this sort is at the heart of philosophy. All the great philosophers have been sceptics in this sense. It is the opposite of dogmatism. Someone who is dogmatic is very confident that they know the truth. Philosophers challenge dogma. They ask why people believe what they do, what sorts of evidence they have to support their conclusions. That was what Socrates and Aristotle did and it is what present-day philosophers do too. But they don't do this just for the sake of being difficult. The point of moderate philosophical scepticism is to get closer to the truth, or at least to reveal how little we know or can know. You don't need to risk falling off a cliff edge to be this kind of sceptic. But you do need to be prepared to ask awkward

questions and to think critically about the answers that people give you.

Although Pyrrho preached freedom from all cares, most of us don't achieve that. One common worry is the fact that each of us will die. Another Greek philosopher, Epicurus, had some clever suggestions about how we can come to terms with this.